

The Royal College of Physicians
with the Author's Compliment
REMARKS
15

ON THE

EXAMINING MEDICAL BOARD FOR INDIAN
APPOINTMENTS;

AS

CONSTITUTED FROM YOUNGER MEMBERS OF SCHOLASTIC
MEDICAL ESTABLISHMENTS IN THIS METROPOLIS;

AND

UNAIDED BY THE ADVICE AND EXPERIENCE OF INDIAN ARMY MEDICAL
OFFICERS AT HOME.

IN A

LETTER

TO

SIR CHARLES WOOD, BART.,

PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF CONTROL,

FROM

JAMES BIRD, M.D., F.R.C.S.,

LATE PHYSICIAN-GENERAL OF THE BOMBAY ARMY, ETC.

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THE

RIGHT HONOURABLE SIR CHARLES WOOD, BART.,

PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF CONTROL.

SIR,

WHEN the Board of Commissioners for India, under sanction of the East India Bill, regulated the system of examination, by which medical candidates, desirous of entering the Indian army, could alone obtain commissions, the change from the old method, by which Assistant-Surgeons were appointed to this service, was hailed as a concession granted to advanced professional and public opinion, and as a boon calculated to mark an era in the administration of public affairs. Immediate and indirect advantages might naturally be expected to flow from such a change of system, if the fairness and purity of its practical application were found not to fall short of the Utopian perfection, that seemed so plausibly recommended in the original theoretical conception. These expected advantages were deemed of infinite importance, as the tendency of the system would be to distribute, in a more just and liberal manner, official appointments to the most practical and best informed

members of the medical community in this country, and was thus calculated to raise the standard of scientific and professional qualification of those who might, in future, belong to the medical service of India. This change of system was expected, moreover, to bring to the ranks of this service men, animated by higher and nobler principles, inciting them to professional exertion, when grounded on a higher absolute standard of professional fitness, ascertained by the criterion of an examination, conducted by a Medical Board of Examiners. The examiners so appointed, however, having, unfortunately, little or no experience of India, and being without a knowledge of the economy of military hospitals, the contingencies of military life, or the modifications of diseases to which such give rise, may prize the readiness with which mechanical answers can be returned to their questions by those examined, but can be no fit judges of their capacity for practical observation and knowledge of military diseases, or of their medical acquaintance with the economy and duties of military hospitals, which should constitute the chief qualifications of the army physician and surgeon.

The miseries experienced by the sick and wounded of our hospitals, whether in European or tropical climates, originate not so much from a want of medical knowledge among the medical staff, and regimental officers of an army, as from a want of comprehensive understanding of the varied and multiform causes, which produce sickness and increase mortality among military masses; accompanied by a yet greater want of practical aptitude to apply the necessary means of prevention, so as to keep the ratio of sickness and

mortality, both for climate and war, at its lowest limit, and thus maintain troops in efficiency, though encompassed by perils of every kind. I would by no means undervalue the propriety or necessity of a purely scholastic examination, as in part a criterion of the medical candidates' qualifications and fitness for the appointments they seek to fill; but I must, in the strongest manner, deprecate its adoption as the only means of testing the merits of candidates, whose necessary acquirements in military medicine and surgery, their knowledge of the diseases and casualties inseparable from war and foreign climates, their seeming capacity and knowledge for conducting the medical business of regiments or an army, and the indications of possessing habits of hospital arrangement and foresight, ought to be fully counted in the award which should decide the superiority of medical merit.

The success and efficiency of armies do not entirely depend on the commander; they may be decimated by hospital gangrene among the wounded, which might be entirely prevented by proper hospital arrangements, and by removing the causes which give rise to it; or they may be wasted by other forms of pestilence, as plague, yellow or typhus fever, and epidemic dysentery, which increase, and acquire fearful malignancy, under medical mismanagement and ignorance of this part of military medical duty.

And can a Board of Examiners, selected from two medical scholastic establishments of this metropolis, possessing comparatively little practical acquaintance with the diseases incident to tropical climates, or to military life, be best prepared to judge of the medical

erudition and practical efficiency of Assistant-Surgeons for India? I think not, Sir; and I am supported in this opinion, I believe, by most of those best acquainted with the necessities of the Indian medical service, and by a disinterested majority of my experienced professional brethren here. I have every reason to think that, had the arrangements and composition of the Indian Medical Board of Examination originated solely with yourself, and uninfluenced by the medical advice and opinions of others, from whom counsel was sought in this matter, you would not have ignored, by the appointments that have been made, the intelligence, efficiency, and meritorious labours of those who have zealously carried out medical education in the various scholastic establishments of India, or who have evidenced, by their useful writings, the highest military medical talent and knowledge. In this I speak not from any desire to depreciate the general medical acquirements and character of the gentlemen who have been nominated to the Examining Medical Board; with no disappointed views or interested objects myself, but solely to deprecate the adoption of a system of selection that promises to be fraught with much evil; and which, by the total exclusion of the retired and experienced medical Indian officers at home, carries with it unmerited obloquy and neglect of every member of that service to which I had the honour to belong, and in which I still feel a warm interest.

The medical service of India, as is recently set forth in a memorial to the Chairman of the Court of East India Directors, by Surgeon Stovell, of the Bombay Army, are already placed under greater

disadvantages, in respect to promotion, emoluments, retirement, and honour, than their military cotemporaries of equal ranks, and further injustice and neglect need not have been added to this catalogue of complaints. Though in the matter of nominations to the medical examining Medical Board for India, I by no means doubt the honesty of your own intentions, I must arraign unconditionally the judgment of your medical advisers, who, through the mists of prejudice or self-interest, could not apparently discern either superior medical acquirements or merit, except among the most junior ranks of the profession in this metropolis. The principles of examination for the candidates, and the practical system adopted for carrying out such examination, are intimately connected with the efficient working of the new India Act, and with the ultimate practical efficiency of medical men selected for India. Neither the qualifications now required from the candidates, nor the purely scholastic means of ascertaining the superiority of individuals, are likely to secure such practical efficiency among the men selected; while thousands of our European and native soldiery in India, their wives and their children too, must owe their welfare or misery to the practical bearing of the professional principles taught to those selected, and who are to fill up the vacant ranks of the Army Medical Service abroad. The examiners nominated for medicine and surgery, belonging as they do to the Medical Schools of University College, and St. Bartholomew's Hospital, may judge the candidates' qualification according to their notions of teaching adopted by their own schools,

but cannot be impartial judges of the practical bearings of other systems of learning carried out by other schools. I neither know nor wish to learn who were the professional advisers who counselled the adoption of measures so ill calculated to carry out the objects of the new Indian Bill, or improve the practical efficiency of the Indian Medical Service. Had the beneficial working of that Bill been carried out as it ought to be, I could have hoped to see the scientific and practical knowledge, possessed by the experienced medical men of the Indian Army, become more available for advancing medical science in this country, by the Medical Board of Examination being authorized to submit suggestions for improving the collegiate medical education of India, for promoting statistical researches on Tropical and Medico-Military diseases, by better Medico-Military returns, and for advancing the cause of sanitary improvement in all departments of India.

Beyond what has been hitherto obtained from India, on these heads, through the personal exertions of Colonel Sykes, and the improved Medico-Military Returns, moved for in Parliament by Mr. Hume, nothing has been done at the India House to acquire additional information for general public benefit. It is but little creditable to the Court of Directors, moreover, that a well organized department for obtaining, with regularity at home, Army Medical Reports and Returns, and Army Medical Statistics, had not long since been established. The conduct of former Chairmen, too, of that Court has been glaringly unjust, to have withheld the appointment of their Examining Physician from men of approved merit

in their own service, and yet to have given it to men of no superior ability, and who were without any knowledge of India or its diseases. Is it either just or politic, Sir, to thus treat with unmerited neglect the only class of men, who, by their intelligence and past experience of India and its institutions, are alone capable of supplying valuable assistance and advice in all that has relation to Indian Medical improvement, whether collegiate Medical education, or a more scientific and practical medical service? From yourself, at least, the members of the Indian Medical Service might have justly expected better things, as some encouragement to a zealous discharge of their arduous duties under trying circumstances of climate and locality. I have put this question respectfully to you, in justice to the class of men whose cause I advocate. After these prefatory remarks, how far the principles and substance of examination, laid down by the regulations for candidates offering themselves, come short of what they ought to be; how far the objects of the new India Bill are likely to be defeated by the Medical Examining Board for India, as now constituted; and how far measures for examination, excluding from this Board the practical experience of intelligent Indian medical officers at home; how far, I say, all are adverse and unjust, will appear in the course of the following observations.

And *First, let us consider how far the principles and substance of examination, laid down by the regulations for candidates offering themselves, come short of what they ought to be.* Though some of the Directors in the Court of Leadenhall Street, and to their honour

be it spoken, had given away medical appointments, for competition among students, trained at different institutions of the kingdom, and had exacted, from those who competed, certificates of both high professional and scientific acquirements, still public opinion and public interests were averse to the old system of examination: the public surmise being, that the merit of men, generally nominated, chiefly consisted in having influence with an East India Director. However defective may have been that system, under it were produced the well known botanical and scientific researches of Roxburgh, Wallich, Royle, Hayne, and Falconer; the labours in general literature and geography of Buchanan, Leyden, Gilchrist, Gerrard, and Wilson; along with the purely medical writings of Paisley, Wade, Balfour, Twining, Annesley, and many others, whose zeal and devotion to advance professional knowledge are manifest, in the valuable medical and topographical reports of the stations and diseases of the Madras army; by the equally valuable transactions of the medical societies of Calcutta and Bombay, and by the elaborate medical reports of cholera at the several presidencies.

What may be the useful results of the new system are yet to be known; but serious and great defects in the regulations, sanctioned for carrying it out, are evident. None are more serious than the total absence of provision for ascertaining the previous moral character of individuals, and their probable estimate of Christian responsibility, on the subject of professional obligations to their patients' families, and the public service. Under the old plan, the moral antecedents of individuals were generally known to the

Directors who appointed them ; but now, all restraint in this matter has been removed ; and the only provision made, is that those appointed may possess no constitutional disease or physical disability. However great may be individual acquirements, in scientific medicine and surgery, they can never elevate medical character in general estimation, or render professional labours more useful, unless animated by a high sense of man's duties and responsibilities in relation to his Creator and his patients. At no time, perhaps, in the history of the medical profession, was some provision here more wanted than at present.

Again, the regulations provide that the examination of the candidates shall be conducted by one examiner in *medicine*, one in *surgery*, one in *anatomy* and *physiology*, and one in *natural history*. Though the Examiner in Medicine may know little of the principles of midwifery, and has probably never attended a case of difficult labour ; though he has never studied perhaps the diseases of women and children, or has never yet learned to view comprehensively and correctly the difficult subject of *hygiene* and *military economics*, he is nevertheless taxed with the task of examining in all these branches, beyond the proper subjects of his examining duty, the *principles* and *practice of medicine*, *therapeutics*, and *pharmacy*.

The Examiner in Surgery, too, without any *military training*, by which he could acquire a knowledge of anything beyond the Civil Hospital knowledge of the great principles and practice of surgery in this metropolis, is tasked with examining in all departments of surgery, by which may be understood, I presume, *military surgery*, or the principles and prac-

tice of surgery to be applied to the localities and other contingencies of the soldier's life, and to the peculiar duties of the military surgeon. Now, Sir, one of the greatest and most distinguished surgeons of this century, the late Mr. John Bell, who was trained in the dissecting room, and had practised largely in a Civil Hospital, felt, as Sir George Ballingall wisely remarks, that he had yet something to learn. That *something* was, that, in a great field of naval or military surgery, "he should become acquainted with the peculiarities of gun-shot wounds, the nature of scurvy, military ulcers, fevers, fluxes, and infectious diseases ; and be able to teach medical geography, the climates, seasons, coasts of various countries, the manner of conducting soldiers on a foreign expedition, the general care of their health, the choice of encampments, the forming of hospitals on shore ; how to convert churches, garrisons, and public buildings into occasional hospitals ; how to attend an army in the field ; how to lay the wounded in besieged towns ; how to carry them off the field in a retreating army." Without a knowledge of such things, and also of *tropical medicine*, no medical candidates are eligible for service in the British army, and are necessarily unfit for military service ; yet, the *Indian Medical Examiner on this subject* need not possess any such knowledge ; nor do the regulations render it incumbent that the candidate, beyond option, should have attended a course of military surgery.

Secondly, any one disposed to impartially consider the whole tenor of these observations,—and which I have felt imperatively called upon to make to you, after a long and intimate acquaintance with the

requirements of both the *scholastic* and *army departments* of the Indian Medical Service,—can hardly come to any other conclusion, than *that the objects of the new India Bill are likely to be defeated by the imperfection and insufficiency of the Examining Medical Board for India, as now constituted.* Having for sometime filled the situation of Secretary to the Board of Education, at Bombay, and thus become acquainted with the character and requirements of the scholastic establishments of India; and, having, moreover, been nominated to fulfil the duties of Surgeon to a large General Hospital, those of an Inspector-General of Hospitals, and the post of Physician-General at Bombay, I may claim some indulgence for freely expressing my public opinions on points connected with the efficiency and welfare of the Indian Army Medical Service; with which I have or ought to have more acquaintance than any non-official medical adviser in London, who neither cares to advance the character nor interests of this service. Not only are the objects of the New India Act, for improving the character and qualifications of those who obtain medical commissions for India, likely to become void; but a yet more serious evil, of partiality and injustice, introduced into the proceedings of examination, by the medical interests of the Edinburgh, Dublin, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and St. Andrew's universities, being altogether unrepresented by the constitution of the present Board. The security of such interests ought to be provided for by the introduction of independent members, who, from their position and antecedents, were neither likely to be guided in their judgment by the interested opinions of others, nor to

show undue leaning to the teaching of any school. The rival contentions of different corporate interests throughout the kingdom, and the private views of individual cupidity and selfishness, which have hitherto so successfully thwarted enlarged and liberal plans of medical reform for the general good of the profession, might have been here sufficiently instructive to government on the subject of what the public might expect, in regard to the Examining Medical Board for India ; and that, in its composition, such constitutional checks should have been provided, as would prevent the undue preponderance of particular interests.

And, *Thirdly, I may ask, are measures for examination which exclude from the Board the advice and practical experience of intelligent Army Medical Officers from India, likely to secure such desirable results?* After the facts which have been adduced, and the reasons given in the preceding pages, it is scarcely necessary to say, that the answer must be in the negative. With every disposition to believe, however, in the sincerity of your own good intentions relative to this matter, I am not without hope that, after a candid consideration of the defects and possible evils of the system adopted, the necessary remedial measures may be applied. Those measures should provide:—

First, that certificates of each candidate's moral character and general conduct while a student, should be adduced in his favour before the Board shall proceed to his examination.

Second, that on the subjects of examination, it shall be imperative on the candidate to possess a knowledge of *military surgery* and *tropical medicine*.

Third, that a special examiner be appointed to test

the candidate as to his knowledge of midwifery, and of the diseases of women and children.

And, fourth, that in the composition of the Examining Medical Board for India, some constitutional check should be provided to prevent the undue preponderance of particular medical interests.

Having thus publicly canvassed the merits of measures, which must be for the good or evil of many, the importance of the whole question, as bearing on the efficiency and welfare of the Indian medical service, and the proper working of the New India Bill, must plead as my excuse for the freedom with which I have entered on the consideration of them.

I have the honour to be,

SIR,

Your most obedient servant,

JAMES BIRD.

27, Hyde Park Square,
7th December, 1854.

